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SCHWEITZER TOUTS STATE'S ENERGY POTENTIAL

By Nancy Kimball

Mr. McGuire had one word for young Benjamin, aka Dustin Hoffman, in the 1967 movie "The Graduate."

"Plastics," the well-to-do businessman advised the newly graduated boy on building his career. Plastics.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer told a gathering of electric power cooperative and business leaders in Kalispell Monday that the word today would be "storage."
Find a way to store power produced by wind generation, methane capture, coal gasification, solar photo voltaic systems or any number of other renewable energy sources, and the United States could break the bonds of dependence on foreign oil.

The forum hosted by Flathead Electric Cooperative was designed to showcase projects and programs across Western Montana that are developing efficient ways to meet the state's Renewable Energy Standard.

Passed by the 2005 Montana Legislature, it directs the state's investor-owned utilities to incorporate an increasing amount of renewable sources into their electricity generation — 5 percent by 2008, 10 percent by 2010, and 15 percent by 2015, with some of it to come from small, locally owned projects. Member-owned cooperatives are exempt, but must show progress toward meeting the intent of the law.

Schweitzer upped the ante for state government departments, setting a goal last year to cut electricity usage 20 percent by 2010.

Speakers at the forum included state and local electric cooperative representatives, Hank Ricklefs and Chuck Roady of Plum Creek and Stoltze lumber companies, John Helton who recently became Flathead Electric's first full-grid-tied customer with his solar power generation system at Martin City, and Flathead County Public Works Director Dave Prunty.

Prunty and Flathead Electric's Director of Energy Services, Ross Holter, are spearheading a garbage-to-power project at the Flathead County landfill. They expect the electric-power generation plant to be up and running by early spring 2009.

Some $3.5 million in Clean Renewable Energy Bonds, tax-credit bonds providing electric cooperatives and municipal utilities with the equivalent of interest-free loans, is helping buy a 1.6-megawatt capacity generator at the landfill site. It will by powered by odorless methane and carbon dioxide from decomposing garbage — trace gases are

what cause the odors, Prunty said — suctioned off the 1 million tons of waste now at the site.

Today, methane gas is drawn away from decomposing matter and flared in order to meet requirements to keep it out of the groundwater and the air.

Prunty said new wells will be drilled to draw off the 400 cubic feet a minute that the generator will need to produce 900 kilowatts per hour when it first is fired up. The landfill's current wells draw 120 cubic feet of methane a minute.

Major metropolitan areas have been using the electric-generation technology for the past 10 or 15 years, Prunty told the group, but this partnership will bring it to Montana. Although the fourth largest in the state, the Flathead landfill is the first to institute a biomass energy generation plant.

Prunty said that, even though it will supply a small portion of Flathead Electric's overall power needs, "the green part is important."

"I see it as a win, win, win," Prunty said. "Flathead Electric gets renewable energy, we get the methane gas out of the way and the citizens get power."

The forum's eight other speakers detailed projects planned and under way to develop renewable energy. Co-generation plants at Stoltze Lumber and Plum Creek, for example, would supply the plants with steam to dry down their lumber and generate electricity to sell to Flathead Electric.

On a national and even global scale, Schweitzer said Montana could play a key role.

Thirty percent of the world's coal supply lies within Montana. And 50 percent of the world's electricity is coal-generated, he said. Coal gasification, a process by which methane and carbon dioxide are produced by putting coal under pressure, has been one of the governor's strongest initiatives.

But wind generation, with the Judith Gap wind farm a prime example, needs to be in the equation, Schweitzer said. Although wind directly powers the wind turbines only 41 percent of the time on any given day in Eastern Montana, modeling has shown a way to parlay that up to 80 percent of demand. With highest demand for electricity coming in late morning, just when Montana's winds start to crank up, utilities could tap into that and then store the rest for off-peak usage.

Schweitzer went to Capital Hill last week touting two pieces of legislation that, in his words, would change the world.

First, give a 15 percent tax credit for plug-in hybrid vehicle purchases, encouraging more drivers to buy them. As 93 percent of U.S. vehicles are driven fewer than 40 miles a day, the battery would be enough to power daily trips and the United States could

slash oil consumption by 83 percent, he said.

Second, require every utility in America to allow consumers to sell their independently generated power back to the utility in real-time trading dollars.

“Make them capitalists,” he said, “and you can bet consumers will be better consumers.”